

CLAIMS

1. A method for prepayment of a service, comprising the steps of:
informing the user of the availability of a plurality of different services;
receiving from the user over a first communications link an indication of a
5 desired service and a request for the desired service; and
providing the requested service to the user over a second communications
link;
receiving from the user an authentication key to indicate prepayment for the
requested service;
10 verifying whether the authentication key is valid, and
providing the requested service if the authentication key is valid.
2. A method according to claim 1, wherein the step of informing the user of the
availability of a plurality of different services informs the user of the availability of a
15 plurality of different contents, and correspondingly, the step of providing the
requested service provides the requested content.
3. A method according to claim 1, wherein an authentication key is required each
time a service is provided.
- 20 4. A method according to claim 1, the method further comprising:
the step of arranging each of the authentication keys to indicate a time
period during which they are valid;
the step of verifying of validity of the authentication key comprises the step
25 of comparing of the present date with time period during which the authentication
key is valid; and
the step of rejecting expired authentication keys.
5. A method according to claim 1, wherein the method further comprises the
30 following steps before receiving the request from the user:
generating the authentication key;
maintaining an authentication key validity database for verifying the validity

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of any of the generated authentication keys; and
delivering the authentication key to a user.

6. A method according to claim 5, wherein the generating of the authentication
5 keys conforms to certain algorithm(s) so that the validity of the authentication key
can be determined in itself.

a 7. A method according to claims ~~4 and 5~~, the method further comprising:
the step of scanning the database of used authentication keys for detecting
10 lapsed authentication keys for removing them from the database of used
authentication keys.

8. A method according to claim 5, wherein the method further comprises the step
of modifying the validity database on providing the requested service so that the
15 monetary value corresponding to the authentication key indicating the payment is
reduced according to a price of the service requested by the user.

9. A method according to claim 1, wherein the the authentication key is a printed
user readable code.
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10. A method according to claim 1, wherein the method further comprises the step
of concealing the authentication key with a non-reversibly removable concealing
means.

a 25 11. A method according to claims ~~9 and 10~~, wherein the method further comprises
printing a group of authentication keys on a card.

12. A method according to claim 1, wherein the first communications link is based
on at least one of the following: a data network, a telephone network, a mobile
30 telecommunications network, a local area network and a wide area network.

13. A method according to claim 1, the method further comprising the steps of:

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14. A system for prepayment of a service, comprising:

- means for informing the user of the availability of a plurality of different services;
- means for receiving from the user over a first communications link an indication of a desired service and a request for the desired service; and
- means for providing the requested service to the user over a second communications link;
- means for receiving from the user an authentication key to indicate prepayment for the requested service;
- means for verifying whether the authentication key is valid, and
- means for providing the requested service if the authentication key is valid.

computer readable program means for causing a computer to inform the user of the availability of a plurality of different services;

20 computer readable program means for causing a computer to receive from the user over a first communications link an indication of a desired service and a request for the desired service; and

25 computer readable program means for causing a computer to receive from
the user an authentication key to indicate prepayment for the requested service;

computer readable program means for causing a computer to provide the
30 requested service if the authentication key is valid.